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**Let's Talk About
Civility and
Professionalism...**

**Afghanistan's
Imperiled Women
Judges and Their
Connection to Vermont**

PURSUITS OF HAPPINESS

Eve Jacobs-Carnahan, Attorney → Artist

KSV: Hi Eve – and thanks so much for agreeing to talk with us about your “Pursuit of Happiness.” As you know, for this feature, we interview attorneys with interests, avocations, vocations, what have you, outside of the practice of law that help keep them balanced or provide fulfillment. You had a long career as an attorney in Vermont and you are now a professional artist who has attracted a lot of attention for your knitted sculpture that explores themes of democracy. I want to hear all about that, but let’s start at the beginning. Can you tell me a little about your origins? Where did you grow up?

EJ-C: I grew up in Niskayuna, NY, in the Capital District of New York. It’s the home of the General Electric research lab. My father was a physicist at GE and my mother was a social worker who served on lots of community boards and planning committees.

KSV: What did you want to be when you were kid?

EJ-C: I didn’t have any particular plan back then.

KSV: What were your favorite subjects in school?

EJ-C: I liked social studies and math.

KSV: Did you think then that at some point you might be a full-time artist? Was art always an interest for you in your formative years?

EJ-C: I never considered becoming an artist when I was young but appreciating art every day was pretty much ingrained in my life. We had original artwork in my home when I was growing up. It included paintings by my mother, who took art classes in the community, and work by my grandfather, plus work by artists that he collected. My mother did pen and ink drawings in sketchbooks whenever we went on family vacations. Visiting art museums was a staple on most of our family travels when I was a kid.

KSV: Tell me about your decision to go to law school. When did you make that? What moved you in that direction?

EJ-C: I became interested in government and politics in high school. The women’s rights movement, especially the effort to



Eve in her studio with one of the green herons from *Gerrymandering the Marsh*.

pass the federal Equal Rights Amendment, inspired me to become a lawyer. I majored in history and political science in college and did internships with the Corporation Counsel’s Office of the City of Schenectady and with a state legislator in New York.

KSV: Where did you go to law school?

EJ-C: The University of Chicago.

KSV: Did you have an idea about what kind of legal work you wanted to do in your career at that point?

EJ-C: I thought I would like to do public interest law or possibly work for government. Those were not common career plans among my U of C classmates. Most of them were aiming to work for major corporate law firms in Chicago, New York, and LA.

KSV: Can you outline your legal career for me?

EJ-C: My first year out of law school, I clerked for Justice Herbert P. Wilkins on the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. Then I went to Bingham, Dana & Gould and did corporate litigation for two and a half years. I received great training at Bingham, but I could see that I was not going to be happy there in the long run. After my first child was born, my husband, who was from Vermont, took the position of Librarian of the Vermont Historical Society. I figured I’d be able to find a position as a lawyer in Vermont state government once we moved up here.

KSV: Tell me about your work as a Vermont AAG.

EJ-C: I started in the AG’s Office in 1990 handling disciplinary cases before professional licensing boards for nursing, real estate professionals, psychologists, and other professions. After several years, my responsibilities within the Civil Division expanded to litigation defending the State of Vermont and its employees. I handled some challenging and exciting high-profile cases in the lower courts and on appeal. These included *Baker v. State of Vermont*, the same same-sex marriage case, and the State’s response to the St. Francis Sokoki Abenaki petition for recognition before the Bureau of Indian Affairs. My most significant work was in the area of election campaign financing. In 1999, I was given the task of defending the State’s newly

enacted statute limiting campaign expenditures. I was lead trial counsel for the case known as *Randall v. Sorrell* that was ultimately decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2006. I ended up with a specialty defending Vermont’s election campaign financing laws and bringing civil enforcement actions. I handled cases against the Republican Governors’ Association, Vermont Right to Life, the Vermont Democratic Party, and some Progressive candidates.

KSV: What place did your art occupy in your life while you were a working lawyer?

EJ-C: It started as a creative outlet, a way to exercise a different part of my brain after spending hours and hours reading and writing legal memos and briefs.

KSV: Did it get to be something that was hard to juggle with your law work?

EJ-C: During most of the 27 years I worked in the AG’s Office, I worked about 80% time. In the early years, I had a part-time schedule in order to take care of my children. At other times, that schedule provided me with time to serve on the Montpelier School Board and the Beth Jacob Synagogue Board. It also allowed me to spend time in making art. I think that really helped recharge my energy so that I was a more productive and effective lawyer.

KSV: Can you tell me about your process of transition from attorney to artist. Wasn’t it



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Knit Democracy Together, collaborative sculpture, yarn, felt, knitting needles, enamel, foam board, rigid foam, metal tin, dowels, 41 x 68 x 33 inches. © 2021 Eve Jacobs-Carnahan. Photo credit: Paul Rogers Photography.

a VBA sponsored art exhibit where you got your start as an exhibiting artist?

EJ-C: The first time I showed my art in public was at a VBA conference in 2002 in an exhibit called Expressing Dimensions. The piece I showed was called *Hat for Two Sides of the Brain*. It had a three-dimensional pink peony bursting out of one side and a black and white checkerboard with a mathematical formula on the other side.

KSV: Where did things go from there?

EJ-C: After that I began submitting my work to juried art shows around the country. I took courses in art and textile techniques over the years to improve my skills, but the first time I really thought of myself as an artist was when I went to a week-long sculpture workshop in 2016. Then in 2017 I had an artist residency at the Vermont Studio Center in Johnson. That residency gave me a view into the lives and thinking of the other artists who were there. I felt I could hold my own in conversation with them.

KSV: Is it accurate to say that yarn is your chief medium?

EJ-C: Yarn and other textiles play a prominent role in my artwork. I describe my artwork as mixed media knitted sculpture.

KSV: Why this particular medium?

EJ-C: The first reason is because I was comfortable with knitting. I learned to knit as a child, and as I got older, I knit more and more complicated sweaters and shawls. Then in the mid-1990s I discovered there were artists who used knitting in artwork. And powerful artwork too. They used the emotional power of knitting and its domestic associations to bring sensitivity to serious subjects. It changed my whole perspective on knitting, and I began experimenting on my own.

KSV: The work that brought you to our attention at the VBA was your “Knit Democracy Together” project. One result of that project was the knitted model of the Vermont state house that was on display this fall at the Capitol. I saw it there. It was amazing. I know the Vermont piece was part of a wider project. How did it begin?

EJ-C: Strangely enough, it began at a conference for artists and scientists at the ECHO Center in 2019. The conference was about how to use storytelling through art to communicate about the environment. A couple of the presenters had put together public art projects that really engaged their communities. I wanted to do something like that. But I realized I was a layperson when it came to environmental issues. Now, election law and campaign finance issues – that’s something I knew!

KSV: How did the project develop?

EJ-C: I was familiar with some social action knitting projects that other artists had done, such as Cat Mazza’s Nike Blanket Petition and the Crochet Coral Reef Project organized by Christine and Margaret Wertheim. I decided to hold 90-minute knitting circles where crafters would make pieces of a collaborative sculpture of a state capitol. During the circle I give a presentation about the U.S. electoral process. The first circle was supposed to take place in March 2020, but because the pandemic hit, I had to switch gears and hold them on Zoom. I finally was able to hold in person circles in the fall of 2021.

KSV: Where have you held those circles?

EJ-C: I’ve held knitting circles in Vermont in conjunction with VPIRG, Vermont Humanities, local libraries and museums. I held a one on Zoom in Chicago and another in Rochester, NY. I guided the groups in those

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*Gerrymandering the Marsh, detail view of installation, 43 x 144 x 108 inches.
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states to create knitted sculptures of their state capitol sculptures.

KSV: Were you explaining the US Electoral Process while the circle was knitting away? Were people asking questions? What was the vibe?

EJ-C: The whole point of the knitting circles is to demystify the electoral process. I want to increase general understanding of the process so people can recognize misinformation. I also want to motivate people to get involved in protecting voting rights. The topics I've addressed have varied. At first, I talked about public financing of election campaigns. But as misinformation about the 2020 election spread, I talked about voting by mail and the process of counting votes and certifying elections. I've also talked about gerrymandering and ranked choice voting – ways to either distort or enhance the representative nature of our elections. Knitting circles are such a wonderful setting, because you can bring people together who don't know each other. Yet, participants come into the space with a shared interest in knitting or crochet or crafting. I attract civically minded crafters who are intrigued by the idea of working together on a collaborative project while deepening their knowledge of the electoral system. Some people ask questions, and some are content to sit quietly and absorb what's going on. And, since everyone is working with their hands, it's perfectly acceptable to be quiet.

KSV: Can you describe the physical structure you created for the Vermont project? How was it all put together?

EJ-C: The sculpture is loosely based on the Vermont State House. It is 5 feet long, 3 ½ feet tall, and nearly 3 feet deep.

I made the structure out of carboard and foam board and covered it with the knitted pieces crafted by participants at Vermont knitting circles. The crafters chose their own yarn and stitches, so each rectangular block reflects the individuality of its maker. Surrounding the building, extending another two feet are knitted lawn and gardens. Project participants from Vermont and New Hampshire gathered at the State House in person and stitched these pieces together while the sculpture was there on display.

KSV: Can you talk a little about the meaning you intended for it to convey? There are some knitted gloves, for instance, holding knitting needles as part of the sculpture. What did you intend by adding those?

EJ-C: There are lots of metaphors in this sculpture. The individually crafted blocks reflect people in the community represented in the legislature. The hands are all different colors, just like the people in the community. They hold knitting needles to show that their work is ongoing. Democracy requires maintenance.

KSV: If people are interested in getting involved in upcoming Knit Democracy Together projects, how can they do that?

EJ-C: People can follow the project by joining my email list through the website <https://knitdemocracy.org>. I plan to continue holding knitting circles with the project through 2024. I am also working on expanding the project outside of Vermont.

KSV: I think it's fascinating that your work as an attorney has poured over very directly into your subsequent career as an artist. Would you say that's a fair statement?

EJ-C: Absolutely.

KSV: Of course, 'Knit Democracy Together' is not the total of your artistic output. Tell me what else you have done?

EJ-C: I have made sculptures depicting plants and birds. These explore the human interaction with nature, often pointing the negative impact of our behavior.

KSV: Can you tell me a little more about the sources of your inspiration? I see from your website, <https://evejacobs-carnahan.com/>, that birding, gardening, and cross country skiing are prominent among them.

EJ-C: I am especially attracted to birds and use them as a stand-in for people. We relate to birds easily because they are present everywhere that people live, whether city or small rural town. My father, the scientist, was an avid birdwatcher. He dragged my brother and me out birdwatching on many occasions. I did not appreciate it at the time, but now I enjoy the excitement of identifying a new bird or recognizing a familiar one.

KSV: I took particular note of your "Gerrymandering the Marsh" installation that you describe on your website. That seems like another big project for you that was inspired in its inception by your work in election law. Can you describe that project?

EJ-C: This installation started with a single sculpture of a green heron. I was attracted to the colors of the feathers on their back. Depending on the sunlight, they can look green, blue, or grey. I first saw green herons in Florida, and then began to spot them up here near bodies of water. Sometime after I made the first heron, I was trying out ideas in my head on ways to explain gerrymandering. I had a vague notion that I could arrange different birds into voting districts and show boundary lines manipulated to distort the voting power of one group over another. I also thought it would be cool to include salamanders, since the term for gerrymander originates with an 1812 political cartoon characterizing a Massachusetts electoral district as a monster salamander. That's when I realized the green heron was perfect for this story, because it eats small amphibians like salamanders. With that idea in mind, I created six mixed media knitted green herons, each about two feet tall. Then I made nine clay salamanders. I grouped the herons and salamanders into five districts with three creatures in each. I divided them in such a way that the herons had a majority in three out of five districts, even though they were a minority overall. I set the creatures on large cubes printed with maps of modern gerrymandered districts from around the U.S.

KSV: Has it been exhibited or are there plans for that?

EJ-C: I am currently looking for an appropriate exhibition space for the installation.



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KSV: Tell me about some of the other highlights you've had in your career as an artist.

EJ-C: One highlight was receiving the First Place Mary R. Koch Memorial Award in a national fiberarts exhibition at the Wichita Center for the Arts in 2015 for my environmental sculpture "Knotweed: Not Safe." It came with a monetary prize, which was nice, but the irony of the award was priceless. The award is named for the mother of the Koch brothers, major funders of dark money contributions to political campaigns. Basically, the people who oppose the type of campaign financing work I did at the AG's Office! More recently, I received a fellowship from National Arts Strategies. I was named one of 25 Creative Community Fellows in New England for 2022. The fellowship included a year-long program of training in using the arts as a catalyst for social change and community engagement.

KSV: How about the challenges?

EJ-C: The biggest challenge has been learning how to run a small business. As a lawyer for state government, I never had to look for clients or deal with financial aspects of running a law firm. I'm making up for that now as I make decisions on how to spend re-

sources on things like marketing and professional development.

KSV: Where are you focusing your energy right now?

EJ-C: In the first half of 2023, I'm focusing on making new artwork. I will be spending more time in the studio this spring, exploring some new textile techniques and trying out ways of combining knitted surfaces and clay. I hope this will recharge my creativity before returning to holding more Knit Democracy Together circles later in the year.

KSV: Any work that you're planning that you can preview here?

EJ-C: I'm not sure where the new work is going to go. I'm sure it will include issues of democracy, but they might take a more personal direction. I'm as curious as anyone to see what direction the work takes.

KSV: Eve, thanks so much for agreeing to answer my questions and for sharing your work with us.

Do you want to nominate yourself or a fellow VBA member to be interviewed for Pursuits of Happiness? Email info@vtbar.org.

